

# Home grown: The revival of Australian coffee farms

*Story by Michael Pepperell*



Ask many people in the industry where coffee was discovered and chances are they'll tell you an intriguing story about Kaldi and the Ethiopian heritage. Ask where or when it was discovered in Australia and you'll hear a number of different stories.

Many believe, however, that coffee in Australia was first found planted on the shores of Kangaroo Point in Brisbane in 1832 – admittedly not the greatest area to grow, but according to Coffee Works in Mareeba and the Australian Government's Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, the first. It wasn't until the 1880s that it started to spread along the east coast and down to the fertile plateau of northern New South Wales, marking the beginning of commercial plantations in Australia. It was around this time Australian crops started winning medals all around Europe and a reputation for vibrant growing conditions in the country began to emerge. The market took somewhat of a financial nose-dive soon after, due to rising production costs and a lack of "coffee slaves" available to pick the beans. Australian coffee fell off the radar and the growing business lay dormant for nearly 100 years until increasing global interest started to breathe life into this industry once left for dead.

Business was growing slowly but steadily until the early 1980s when it began to flourish wildly thanks to the world's first mechanical coffee harvester being designed and built on a north Queensland plantation. This harvester, dubbed "Coffee Shuttle #1" helped revolutionise the picking process because it meant lower production costs and much less time between the ripening of the bean to the roasted product. Coffee Shuttle #1 is still in operation today in its birthplace of the Jaques family's plantation in North Queensland – Mareeba to be precise – the state's largest growing region.

In the Mareeba/Atherton region, plantations produce a significant part of Australia's annual harvest, responsible for close to 300 tonnes of coffee annually, according to Ian MacLaughlin, owner of Queensland's Skybury coffee plantation. Mareeba is also home to Coffee World, a museum dedicated to this magical bean and the changes made since its discovery including innovations in brewing methods and how history has changed people's perceptions.



Many Australian plantations produce a high percentage of organic Arabica because of the naturally pest-free mountain soil. This creates what has come to be known as Australia's "clean green" image. According to Australia's Border Security Department, many Third World coffee-growing countries, particularly those susceptible to the notorious Khapra beetle, are unable to grow organically without the use of pesticides.

Those who do grow organically need to be very careful; close inspections are carried out before export. The same inspections are carried out upon arrival in Australia, and some coffee needs to be sprayed upon entry, meaning not all organically grown coffee imported to Australia can acquire the prestigious 100 per cent Certified Organic label. There are two main growing regions in Australia and most plantations can be found in the high altitude Atherton tablelands and northern New South Wales. Several smaller single estate plantations are scattered along the area surrounding the granite belt, as well as areas on the tropical and sub-tropical seaboard, which means coffee farms are restricted mainly to Queensland and the Northern Rivers region. The latter is 1600 kilometres from the tropic of Capricorn, making it the southern-most growing region in the world.

The cooler climate areas in New South Wales create growing conditions which produce slower ripening, naturally sweet beans. This means the coffee will produce unique flavours, and many believe this is the reason behind the naturally lower caffeine content, even though this has not been scientifically proven. The secret lies in the area surrounding what is known as the Granite Belt. Although coffee is not directly attributed

to the Granite Belt, the unique combination of micro-climates and rich volcanic soils surrounding the area replicate the conditions found in more equatorial growing regions of 1200 metres or higher – perfect for the cultivation of specialty coffee which is found in the scattered single estate plantations in southern Queensland and northern NSW.



Many of Australia's plantations are single estate lots, on which they grow, process, roast, and package their product on site, ready for sale or export. Many of these can be found tucked away, hidden in the sides of various mountain ranges such as Mount Tamborine Coffee in the Gold Coast hinterland; this plantation is like a hidden oasis nestled in the rainforest surroundings. Co-owner Kees Van Rijssen, a man who likes to refer to himself not as a farmer, but a guardian of the plants, is a prime example of Australian coffee culture – this man will treat you with the same hospitality he would show his own family. He has received recognition by the Specialty Coffee Association of Europe. Many smaller plantations in Queensland only supply their product to private customers or online via their website and seldom will you find a café using their coffee outside of the surrounding area.

When it comes to the larger plantations, most of them are situated in the Atherton Tablelands region in north Queensland, such as the Jaques family's, home of the famous Coffee Shuttle #1, and Skybury plantation, whose coffee is enjoyed in as far as Paris, Berlin, and the UK. This plantation, or more specifically, the land it sits on, has recently been recognised as deserving of the highest level of environmental protection in an attempt to preserve the unique landscape and top-quality volcanic soil which is integral in the production of export quality specialty coffee.

Venture down a little further to the beautiful landscape of New South Wales – also fondly referred to as the “Big Scrub” – and you'll find the most awarded and best-known Australian coffee plantation, Mountain Top Coffee (MTC), a 25-hectare single estate with much of the coffee produced used for export.

MTC's Andrew Ford says that while Australian coffee offers fantastic potential, it's been partly stifled by a lack of investment and organisation. Hawaii serves as a good point of comparison, as this region of the United States is the only other developed area of the world that grows coffee. Following World War II, the Japanese invested heavily into Hawaiian coffee production, and between Japan and the United States, the region has a large consumer base. The investment led to the strong development of the Hawaiian coffee industry, which was backed by government quality control initiatives and investment in marketing.

Comparatively, Andrew says that the Australian industry is relatively young when compared to Hawaii, where many growers in Australia have been farming coffee for less than 15 years, with some growers having turned to coffee as a lifestyle choice and subsequently are hobby farms.

In the Mareeba area, many farmers moved to coffee when the Australian government disallowed tobacco crops. As a result, the coffee growing industry is still in its infancy compared to Hawaii's mature market.

Exceptions like MTC and Skybury, as well as Green Cauldron located in New South Wales, however, are starting to make their mark in the specialty coffee industry, with many roasters turning to beans grown at home.

Merlo Coffee based out of Queensland has been purchasing Australian coffee for the last eight years, enjoying the idea of coffee that travels fewer miles to get to their roaster. Operations Manager Brendan Baxter says that the company roasts around 200 kilograms a month. Because of the cost of Australian coffee, which comes at a much higher price tag than what they can purchase from overseas because of the costs of production, he says they sell it exclusively as a single origin. The coffee, he says, rings well with consumers who like the idea of drinking local coffee just as they enjoy the idea of local produce.

Single Origin Roasters similarly purchase Australian-grown coffee from MTC. The company's Emma Cohen says that purchasing Australian coffee was a priority for the company right from when they started up around eight years ago. While it can be challenging as they can only source smaller lots, Emma says that the coffee's advanced processing methods and "clean green" image make these micro-lots attractive offerings. Edward Strachan, who looks after Single Origin Roaster's procurement, says that most of the coffee they purchase is grown in areas that hover around the equator. He says it seems strange to purchase coffee from a location so far south. There must be something about the Northern Rivers micro-climate that seems to work well. What the region lacks in latitude, Edward says, they make up for in processing. MTC uses a Double Pass process to add sweetness to the bean. Essentially, they leave the mucilage on for a day similar to a pulp-natural process, but then they rehydrate the pulp and remove the mucilage. The result is a very sweet coffee, a bit like a pulp natural Brazil crossed with an island coffee like a Hawaiian.

The coffee has proven popular among Single Origin Roasters' clients who are looking for coffee with less "food miles". Chefs like Becasse's Justin North, who focus on locally sourced produce, are looking for the same in their coffee.

After all, as Emma says, isn't it extra nice to be drinking something from home?